

Oregon Parks and Recreation Commission

February 11, 2015

Agenda Item: 11

Action

Topic: Natural Areas Registration – Mill Creek Ridge

Presented by: Noel Bacheller

Background: 2011 Senate Bill 58 transferred the State Natural Areas Program from the Department of State Lands (DSL) to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD). OPRD is now responsible for processing nominations/petitions received to voluntarily add lands of a variety of ownerships to the register of State Natural Areas.

“Registration” and “dedication” are two vehicles for inclusion of properties on the register, with dedication being the more permanent arrangement. Privately owned lands that are registered or dedicated receive a waiver of land use conversion property taxes. Publicly-owned lands are registered because of ecological value without receiving a tax benefit. In all cases of registration or dedication, the subject properties are required to be of high or unique ecological value. The types of habitat that are eligible for inclusion on the register are described and cataloged in the State Natural Areas Plan as “ecosystem elements”. When enough examples of a particular ecosystem element are registered, that type is considered adequately represented and further registrations are no longer allowed for that element.

Per legislation, the steps in processing registration nominations are as follows: OPRD Stewardship staff and the Oregon Biodiversity Information Center (or a convened review board, at OPRD discretion) collaboratively review petitions for meeting the requirements of the State Natural Area Plan. If the subject property meets the requirements and intent of the Plan, OPRD Stewardship staff bring the proposal for registration to the Parks Commission for final decision regarding registration.

In December of 2014, OPRD staff received a petition to register a private parcel in Wasco County. A brief description of the property, its ecological value, context, and reasons for registration are attached. Staff reviewed the petition and concluded that the subject property is of high ecological value and meets the intent of the State Natural Areas Plan.

Prior Action by the Commission: None.

Action Requested: Staff recommend that the Commission approve the addition of the Natural Area into the registry of State Natural Areas.

Prepared by: Noel Bacheller

OREGON PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT
OREGON REGISTER OF NATURAL HERITAGE RESOURCES
SUMMARY FORM

1. NATURAL AREA NAME: Mill Creek Ridge Conservation Area – Oak Savanna
2. LOCATION: Wasco County, Township 1N, Range 12E, Section 12
3. SIZE: 160 acres
4. OWNERSHIP: Columbia Land Trust
5. CONSENT OF OWNER (PRIVATE), DATE: December 3, 2012
6. REGISTER CATEGORY: State Natural Area
7. PRINCIPAL NATURAL HERITAGE RESOURCES:
East Cascades Ecosystem:
Grasslands and Shrubland Steppe- #44 Bluebunch wheatgrass-Sandberg bluegrass
Special Types - #51 Oregon white oak/bitterbrush/bluebunch wheatgrass
#52 Ponderosa pine-Oregon white oak woodland
8. SPECIAL SPECIES: The site has a population of the priority species, Lewis' woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*). The site has also been identified as a location for potential restoration of two other, high priority species, White meconella (*Meconella oregana*) and Dalles Mt. buttercup (*Ranunculus reconditus*).
9. EVALUATION OF CRITERIA FOR REGISTRATION
 - A. PRIORITY IN PLAN: # 52 is an unfilled, high priority need (page 117). The Oregon white oak/bitterbrush woodland and the wheatgrass – bluegrass grassland are already adequately represented the nearby Mill Creek Research Natural Area. There are no sites in north central Oregon listed for Lewis woodpecker.
 - B. ADEQUATE REPRESENTATION: The overall area provides adequate representation for the Ponderosa pine – Oregon white oak woodland, although the area being registered is probably a bit too small to adequately represent this site.
 - C. DEGREE OF DISTURBANCE: This site has been grazed in the past so there has been some disturbance over the years, which has allowed non-native species to flourish. However, given that disturbance there is a surprising amount and diversity of native grasses and forbs.
 - D. VIABILITY: This site is one property within a complex of other protected properties on Mill Creek Ridge. This site will be managed along with the others to reduce weed cover and encourage native species to flourish.
 - E. UNIQUE GEOLOGICAL VALUES: None.
 - F. PRIORITY FOR SPECIAL SPECIES: Lewis woodpecker is a List 2 species.
 - G. SPECIAL SPECIES PROTECTION CAPABILITY: Excellent.

Mill Creek Ridge Conservation Area – Oak Savanna Summary Form

H. MANAGEABILITY: Columbia Land Trust will manage this property in conjunction with the additional 150 acres owned by the Trust. A management plan formulated by the Trust identifies appropriate actions to steward the Ridge to meet the conservation purposes of the project.

10. SPECIAL REMARKS OR COMMENTS: The property has been acquired by Columbia Land Trust to assure that this large tract of oak/pine woodland/prairie is conserved. It is within the Wasco Oaks Conservation Opportunity Area as designated in the Oregon Conservation Strategy.

12. DATE OF ORBIC STAFF APPROVAL: December 2, 2014.

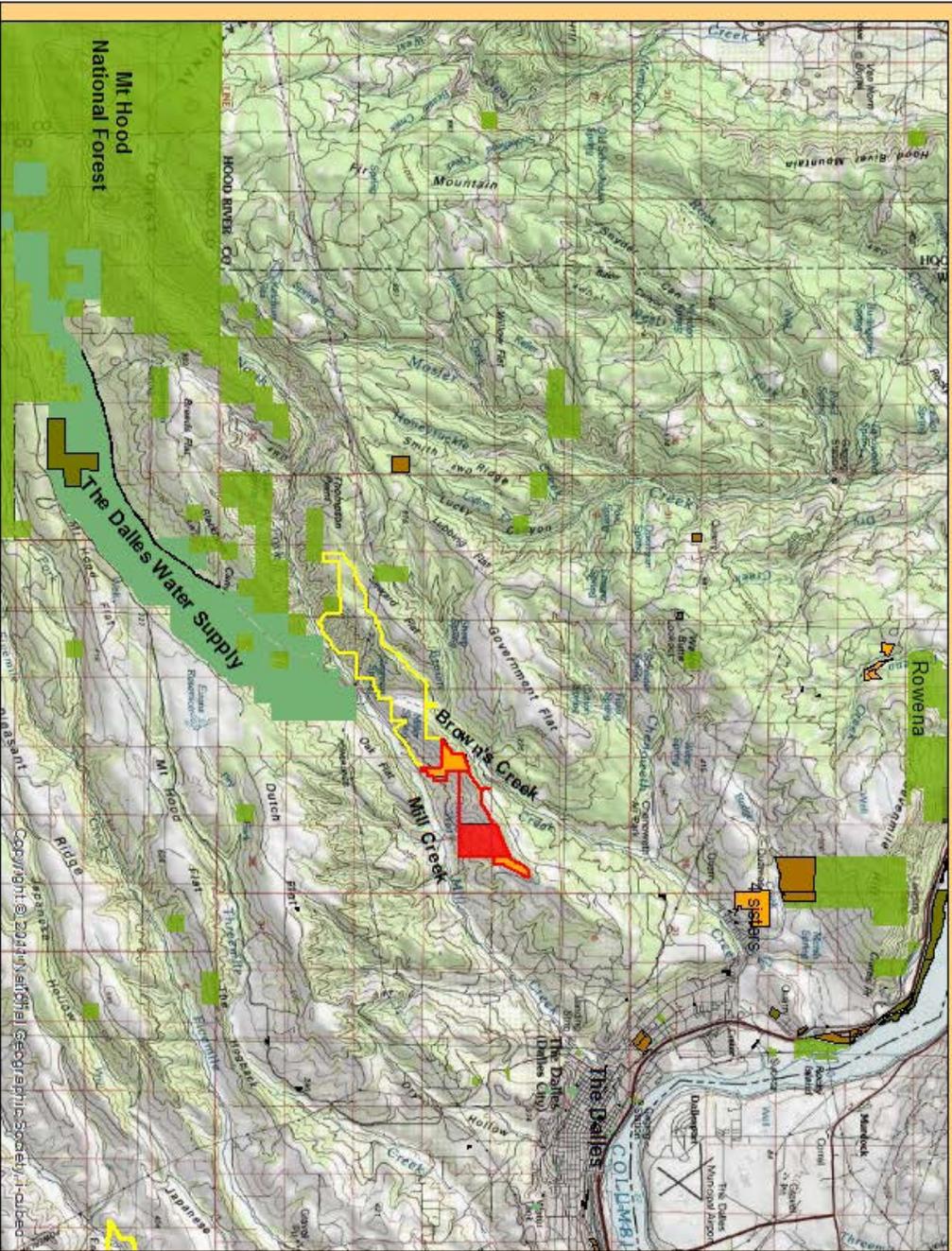
13. SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Oregon Biodiversity Information Center, Mailstop: INR, PO Box 751, Portland, OR 97207. Columbia Land Trust – 1351 Officers' Row, Vancouver, WA 98661 360 213-1207

14. VALUE OF NATURAL AREA IN LAY TERMS: South of The Dalles, rising between the populated riparian corridors of Brown's Creek and Mill Creek is a prominent ridge that extends from the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area eight miles south to the boundary of the Mt. Hood National Forest. Situated in the ecological transition zone between the East Cascades and the Columbia Plateau, the ridge is a mosaic of mature Oregon white oak/Ponderosa pine woodlands and expansive native grasslands replete with perennial bunchgrasses and diverse forbs. The floristic diversity of the property (there are over 90 species of native plants documented in the conservation area) is writ also in the skies with over 50 species of birds including Vaux's swift, western bluebird, a host of raptors, neotropical migratory songbirds, and the iconic western meadowlark. The area is identified by ODFW as a Conservation Opportunity Area for key oak and grassland habitats and key species including Lewis' woodpecker, ash-throated flycatcher and western gray squirrel, all found on the property. The area provides critical winter range for mule deer. Habitats here are sensitive to disturbance yet their beauty is attractive to people too. The subject property is zoned to be divided into 10-acre residential lots.

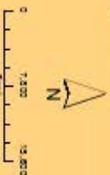


Mill Creek Ridge Conservation Area

Vicinity Map



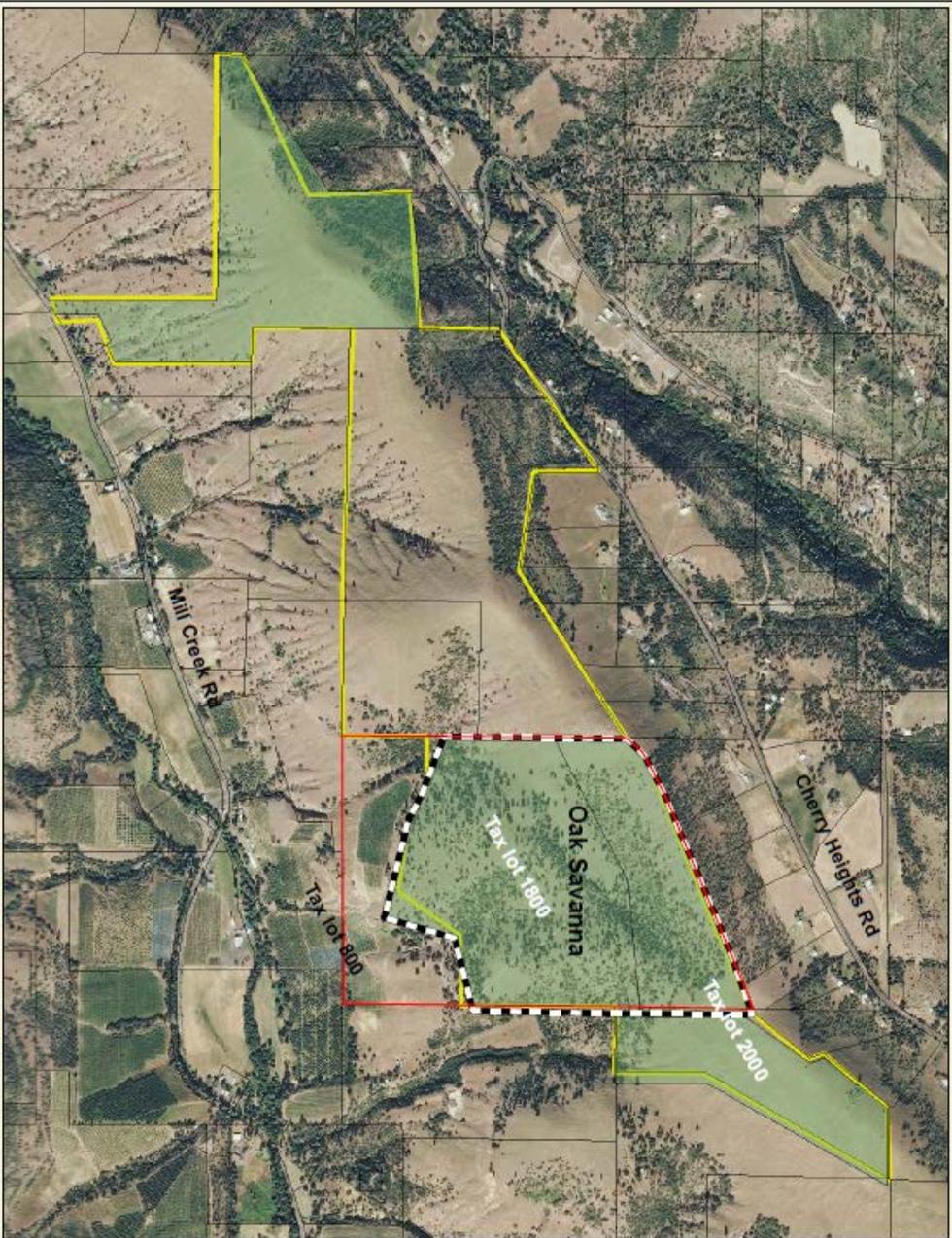
- Legend**
- Mill Creek Phases**
 - Phase 1
 - Phase 2
 - Project P or party
 - Land Trust P or parties
 - Wasco County
 - The Dalles properties
 - Federal lands
 - State properties



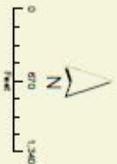
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Map 1 - Vicinity Map Mill Creek Ridge Conservation Area



- Legend**
- Sandor family 200-acre lot
 - OWEB Conservation Easement
 - Land Trust Parcels
 - Wasco_County tax lots
 - Mill Ck Conservation Area



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December 8, 2014

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
725 Summer Street NE, Ste. C
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Oregon Register of Natural Heritage Resources

Dear Parks and Recreation Commission:

Columbia Land Trust is the owner of 160 acres along the Mill Creek Ridge Conservation Area located in Wasco County, Oregon. The Trust is requesting that this property be placed on the Register for Natural Heritage Resources. The property is called Oak Savanna and is a beautiful example of a Ponderosa pine and Oregon white oak woodland in the East Cascades Ecoregion. Columbia Land Trust purchased this property for conservation purposes and intends to manage it for wildlife habitat, passive recreation and scientific study.

Sincerely,

Glenn Lamb
Executive Director

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